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The Intractable Problem of Regional Powers

by Graham E. Fuller and John Arquilla

New forces at work in the post–cold war world are changing the strategic environment in which American foreign policy operates. Chief among these is the emergence or return of states that are creating new configurations of regional power. These states, by definition, possess the will, means, and ambition to conduct foreign policy in their own neighborhood without close regard to the preferences of the United States or multilateral organizations, including the United Nations. These are "new" powers in that they have recently acquired unprecedented opportunities for autonomous action, facilitated by current widespread confusion in the West over strategic values—what really matters and what does not. This confusion makes it unlikely that the United States, absent clear and present danger, would move decisively to prevent the emergence of new centers of strategic power. Maintenance of a global American primacy, although still advocated by some, thus no longer seems a realistic policy goal. As regional politics grow, "renationalization" of strategic policies by other major world states—not an issue during the cold war—cannot be held off for much longer, despite U.S. preferences to the contrary.

As regional centers of power emerge, the United States faces important choices about the kinds of broad strategies to pursue in relation to them: acquiescence, encouragement, or resistance. But in order to choose wisely American policymakers must first understand how international politics are increasingly shaped, not by a single, globalized process, but rather by several regional ones. Next, they must appreciate how new elements of power—especially psychological and behavioral ones—liberated by the end of the cold war are invalidating traditional views of foreign relations. Lastly, they must assess the challenges posed by the combination of new "regionalized" politics and new kinds of power. This article takes up these tasks in turn, applies its findings to the various emerging systems, and discusses their implications for U.S. foreign policy.

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Ambitious new regional powers have been emancipated by the end of a cold war that once imposed sharp discipline on their liberty to destabilize the delicate balance of a bipolar system. Such rising regional powers include—but are not limited to—China, Iran, Iraq, India, Uzbekistan, Indonesia, Vietnam, South Africa, Nigeria, Brazil, Turkey, and Serbia. All these have significant impact on the security and livelihood of their neighbors and thus demonstrate the extent to which power is devolving to new, more autonomous regional systems. To be sure, new global forces such as international economics and the information revolution appear to unify the world as never before and occasionally exert a powerful influence on regional struggles. But even in "economics-dominated" East Asia, trade and communication hardly suffice to explain Beijing's calculus in lobbing missiles into Taiwanese waters. Technology and interdependence, in sum, are far more likely to become instruments in old-fashioned power politics than agencies for transcendence of such conflict.

At the same time, the perceived strategic interests of the United States—the only state capable of aspiring to global management—have narrowed sharply. The interventions in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and even Iraq sparked major debates in Congress. As Americans increasingly ask Who cares? and display a weakening stomach for casualties, it appears that only direct threats such as nuclear proliferation and terrorism are liable to inspire bold U.S. action. Certainly, "softer" issues such as open trade, democratization, human rights, and ecology will not. As a result, recent discussions of U.S. foreign policy have had little to say about geopolitical contexts, with the exception of Russia and China (lest the old, or a new, cold war break out), and an exaggerated concern for Iran. To note this is not to judge the wisdom of less-activist policies, only to observe that regional powers enjoy unprecedented opportunities for wielding international influence.

Today, power is increasingly diffused and redistributed downward into regions—part of a much more complicated world. And where the world once was largely concerned with interstate conflict and competition among great extraregional powers, much of today's international politics revolves around internal conflicts—including the breakup of states and separatism—with regional implications. Hence, insofar as interstate warfare continues, it is less likely to involve fighting among the greatest states and is more likely to feature either localized conflicts between regional states and great powers, or between regional powers and their own local rivals.

Where people once believed the gateway to the creation of new nation states had almost clanged shut, we now witness new waves of ethnic passion and a search for identity and self-determination not readily stemmed—both factors buttressed by growing international sympathy for democracy and human rights. Indeed, the present international order lacks even the energy to impose a moratorium on break-away nations and the formation of new states, many of which are born fighting. The international system has thus become far more unruly, partly because the concept of power is being redefined in nontraditional ways.

Revisiting Concepts of Power

At least three different kinds of power matter today: traditional inherent physical power, the power of acquired material capabilities, and psychological, behavioral power, or what Napoleon and Hitler referred to as will. The first category is quite familiar. Physical power derives from the size, location, and resources of a state, which directly affect the geopolitics of its neighborhood. Among the states that readily come to mind in this category of inherent, concrete power are the United States, Germany, Russia, China, India, Indonesia, and Brazil.

The second form of power is characteristic of states that work to acquire material power and capabilities via shrewd economic policies and organization, the forging of military forces disproportionate to their size, and acquisition of unconventional weapons. In a world awash with sophisticated, readily accessible military technology, it is relatively easy for small states to develop a specialized "niche" capability in warfare—suitable to local conditions and capable of deterring a stronger power from intervening in light of the drastically increased costs of conflict. States can also augment their inherent strength through systems of allies and clients (Western Europe being the most obvious example) or by highly disciplined internal mobilization. Israel, for instance, wields military might out of proportion to its size. Japan has created a powerful economic state, despite a paucity of resources. Iraq and North Korea have built powerful destabilizing military instruments. And even Singapore and Taiwan exercise influence vastly disproportionate to their size. Yet even as economic power gains increasing importance, states like Japan, Taiwan, and Saudi Arabia cannot truly defend themselves against determined opponents—indeed, their unprotected economic power can perversely invite intimidation and attack. During the cold war, these states could rely upon U.S. security guarantees. Now, however, as American protection grows inconstant, rising regional states are creating new economic and industrial forms of power—but including military dimensions that may substantially affect the politics of regional security.

For instance, even poor regional states today can field large military forces since their manpower costs are tiny relative to those of more advanced states. That implies the possibility that economic growth in less-advanced regions may be translated into politico-military power more rapidly than ever before. Lastly, the rise of economic blocs, which have formed in most regions, reinforces the fractionating trend in the world already apparent at the social and political levels. Thus, economic regionalism, in addition to fostering the growth of localized ("niche") military power, may weaken further the old, unified world trading system.

The third form of power lies in the psychological and ideological realms, which, in a world of regions, may matter more than traditional power concepts. Though impossible to quantify, this kind of power is ignored at one's peril. Simply put, psychological power emerges from "national will" born of historical experience and perspective, national myths, sense of destiny, and perceived ethnic or religious mission. What are the historical ambitions or vision of a

given nation (e.g., its manifest destiny)? How powerful is the will of a people to achieve its ends, regardless of size (e.g., Vietnamese, Palestinians, Chechens, or Serbs)? What is the ideology of its state, and how does it crystallize and direct national impulses toward concrete political ends (e.g., in North Korea or Cuba)? Does the nation have a special reading of history that feeds its ambitions? Can the state harness ethnic homogeneity or command responsiveness from related external ethnic or religious diaspora communities—as with the Arab world, overseas Chinese, Slavic nations, or the Latin world? Nations possessed of this element of psychological power can often spark international conflict more easily than the first class of inherently powerful states precisely because of their unpredictability and hostility to the existing international order. They appear, in short, "irrational," especially in their unwillingness to bow to the established order of international power.

States possessing power born of national will are the most difficult to manage.

The unanticipated and rapid ascendence of a state to international importance is an additional psychological factor, often exerting a destabilizing impact upon an international order slow to accommodate new realities. China, Serbia, Iran, and Iraq today, and Vietnam and Cuba at an earlier date, shook the international order with their sudden prominence and audacity. In part, then, new regional powers are self-selected, driven by old or new ambitions, augmented perhaps by a new ideology or charismatic leader, and able to exploit the newly permissive international environment.

A further element of national psychology is the ambitious state's character of governance. Does authoritarian rule facilitate the creation of a united, mobilizing ideology, or does it conversely stifle loyalty and creativity, fostering too much anger, internal resistance, and ultimate fragility? Does democracy serve to strengthen support for national ambitions, or does it dilute such support through endless debate? Does a given regime engage in erratic behavior that awakens uncertainty and concern in its neighbors? Can it intimidate others through ready use or threats of violence, terrorism, brutality, or irregular warfare? Is it willing to run risks and defy international norms? Even Israeli strategists have often spoken of the need to act, or appear to act, as a "crazy state," for instance by retaliating disproportionately to Arab threats to its security. The image of a state and its behavior can thus sometimes persuade neighbors to seek accommodation, while at other times heightening their will to resist.

Additional psychological and strategic advantage can be acquired by aggressive military tactics that use a regionally tailored "niche capability" to deter casual intervention. Even small states wielding many of these characteristics—sometimes called "rogues"—exercise influence considerably in excess of their size. Will the United States, or any other major power, be consistently willing to take on ambitious states that might disturb a regional order, but not the global order? Because of the more volatile, transient nature of this "behavioral" kind of power, it is the most difficult to manage effectively. The possibility that this type of power may characterize much of international conflict in the coming decades is a real and disturbing challenge.

Three Strategies for International Management

Much debate now focuses on the changing interests and future role of the United States as Americans focus on domestic events and ask what foreign imbroglios are of sufficient magnitude to require the United States to expend blood and treasure to alleviate them. Given that the United States appears now to lack both the psychological will and the willingness to expend the resources needed to lead any sort of global order, what more reserved foreign-policy strategy affords it the best chance of defending itself and its interests? No one answer is possible in the new international arena; the response must vary, region by region.

When theorists consider U.S. policy toward regional international systems, they usually identify two classic strategies. First, we can cultivate local hegemons to help manage regional relations—the use of the shah of Iran in the 1970s is probably the best example of this phenomenon. The alternative broad strategy, historically the most time-honored, is the preservation of a balance of power—checking a regionally threatening power by creating local counterweights. Examples of this approach include the strengthening of Iraq against the Islamic Republic of Iran during the 1980s, balancing Vietnam by shoring up Thailand after the fall of South Vietnam, and encouraging South Korea to develop industrially and militarily to hold back the North.

But a third strategy toward regional relations—one generally alien to proponents of vigorous U.S. leadership—can be described as the "laissez-faire" approach. That consists of letting the politics of a region unfold and take its "natural course" without significant outside intervention. Alternative terms for this strategy might be "benign neglect" or even isolationism. It could also be described as an "ecological" approach, whereby extraregional powers refrain from interfering in the normal workings of the local order, partly out of the belief that to turn back a powerful and natural course of events implies heavy costs and risks. An illustrative analogy is the willingness of the U.S. Forest Service to allow large tracts of national forest in Yellowstone Park and elsewhere to burn, because periodic fires are part of the natural cycle of life in forests, clearing the way for new, healthier growth. Of course, people are not trees, and such an ecological approach to foreign affairs might seem coldly Darwinian. But as we have recently seen in the former Yugoslavia, sometimes "fires" must burn their course before pacification is possible.

It is simply the case that powerful forces making for conflict among nations are sometimes extremely difficult or costly to arrest or repress. When an extraregional power expends major effort to attempt to slow or stop a nationalist separatist movement, for instance, or a push for independence, or strives to prop up a "doomed" autocratic regime, the "natural" course of human events is defied. At best, the power attempting to keep the lid on pays a heavy price in resources, lives, and frustration; at worst, it suffers humiliating defeat. How much longer, for example, could the shah of Iran have been propped up late in his rule? How long could the centrifugal forces of the ultimate collapse of communism in the Soviet Union have been withstood, even with massive

external support for the old regime? How long can the Palestinians be held in thrall by Israel, and at what cost, before they have their state anyway?

The assumption behind the laissez-faire approach is that international politics has a certain natural dynamic. When left alone to develop "organically," regions will tend to produce their own locally hegemonic states, or balances of power, or perhaps even chaos for a time. The Balkans present a case in point: absent foreign intervention, would post-Yugoslavia Balkan politics have reached a kind of stasis? Is the international order wise in intervening against forces that might be inevitable, that is, extremely difficult to resist over the longer run? Does resistance against this natural order provide only a false and temporary peace? The sense that certain kinds of forces in politics are irrepressible over the long run suggests that wise powers will choose to resist these ebbs and flows only for a limited period and only when the stakes are exceptionally high. Clearly, in the case of Hitler's bid to conquer Europe or the Soviet bid to bring large portions of the world under communist rule, resistance at very high cost was justified. But how many cases are so clear-cut in history—and who will assume the cost?

If regional conflicts are likely to define much of the history of the coming half century, the United States has no choice but to examine with care the attributes, merits, and drawbacks of the three alternate strategies: support for regional hegemony, local balance of power, and the laissez-faire approach. Far from endorsing any of them per se, we believe that no single strategy is either permanently or universally sound for all regions of the world. Different strategies might be required for different regions at any one time. Indeed, powers wishing to expend minimal resources for maximum effect—which certainly is the case with the United States today—may particularly need to emulate the judo fighter who gauges the power and direction of forces besetting him and maneuvers so as not to absorb them head-on.

Supporting a Regional Hegemon

The idea of supporting a regional hegemon springs from the American disinclination to be the security guarantor of first resort around the world. The political and economic costs of constant intervention to meet crises are simply too high. In principle, a regional power, or powers, could be counted on to maintain local stability with its own diplomacy, prestige, and military power if necessary. In times of regional turmoil, a need for peacekeeping and peacemaking forces might arise, a need that would ideally be fulfilled by the hegemon—as has been the case in Liberia in recent years, where Nigeria has shouldered the financial and military burden of the lengthy peacemaking mission of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Regional hegemons also have an incentive to control local arms flows and prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

The United States might be tempted to pursue this option, particularly in regions where its interests are limited. To be sure, the United States cannot of itself create a regional hegemon, but it can support such a player when it

perceives a mutuality of interests. For example, a tolerably democratic Russia might well emerge as the hegemon in large parts of the former Soviet Union, preventing disorder or conflict from spreading. India might play such a role in South Asia and parts of Southeast Asia. Selected African states such as a democratic Nigeria or South Africa could be the internationally anointed pillar of regional security. Brazil or Argentina could play such a role where required in South America. East Asia is far more complex, since the most obvious regional hegemon, China, is also the most likely source of threats. For the time being, therefore, East Asia is probably not a candidate for a policy based on regional hegemony, but rather for a balance-of-power approach.

A strategy of encouraging or tolerating regional hegemony, however, has several disadvantages. First, some trends in U.S. strategic thinking are antithetical to any kind of regional hegemony if it would limit the role of the United States as primary arbiter of most major conflicts. Secondly, such a system requires confidence that the hegemon shares a number of common values and assumptions about the world and thus would not turn on the West in pursuit of its own interests. A third problem in supporting a regional hegemon is that smaller local states might understandably resist the hegemony—even by attempting to acquire weapons of mass destruction or by looking to extraregional powers for protection. Pakistan's resentment of India's hegemonic drive, for instance, has caused it to develop nuclear weapons and to consort with China and the United States, contributing to regional tensions. Nor can a hegemon guarantee stability if great powers pursue overlapping ambitions in potentially common spheres of influence. For example, India and China will jockey for influence in Southeast Asia and Inner Asia (Tibet, Central Asia), as will Russia in the latter region.

Lastly, a strategy that depends upon a regional hegemon can be risky when U.S. interests are great, since conflicts with the hegemon take on more importance. Indeed, most hegemons, by their very nature, are likely to grow resentful of the need to share power with the United States when they can dominate the region on their own. There may be, in other words, no such thing as a tame hegemon.

A strategy of support for regional hegemons thus offers a few opportunities, but also numerous problems. Yet if the United States is reticent to pursue a strategy of regional hegemons, then it will need to devise means to oppose their rise and turn instead to an alternative policy: traditional balance-of-power diplomacy.

Balance-of-Power Strategy

A balance-of-power strategy offers three basic benefits. First, it leverages U.S. power in that a modest investment of resources may build viable counterweights to would-be regional hegemons. Secondly, a balancing strategy will enjoy the support of most smaller states, who naturally fear the rise of a preponderant power in their region. A great world power, after all, only visits an area briefly and periodically in support of its immediate interests, but a local

regional power is capable of intense and continuous meddling. A third benefit of balancing is that the smaller states feel more secure and therefore are far less tempted to acquire weapons of mass destruction.

But the balancing strategy also poses problems. First, the demands and costs of maintaining a regional balance may be unclear and unpredictable, especially if an aspiring regional hegemon resists efforts to frustrate its dominance. India, for example, has always deeply resented U.S. efforts to make Pakistan a local counterweight and has greatly expanded and modernized its land, sea, and air forces, and even developed nuclear weapons, in its efforts to thwart any balancing strategy aimed against its position in South Asia. The case of India, with its historic turn towards Moscow, also highlights the risk that a thwarted hegemon will seek assistance from extraregional powers to offset, and potentially overcome, an outside balancer.

Further complicating the cost issue is the possibility that the lesser local states will exploit their own strategic importance to intensify their demands upon the United States for material support or protection. Examples of this behavior abound: the small Persian Gulf states versus Iran or Iraq; Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan versus Uzbekistan; and Taiwan versus China. What is more, threatened small states may require direct U.S. combat assistance in order to preserve the balance of power. Under the worst circumstances, that can lead to debacles such as the Vietnam War, but even successful interventions to restore a local balance do not come cheaply, a point demonstrated by the Korean War and the $100 billion Persian Gulf War (of which the United States paid somewhat less than half).

A final problem with a balance-of-power strategy is its inherent complexity. Successful balancing of an aspiring local hegemon requires the marshaling of a number of states, each with its own perception of risks and rewards. In the Persian Gulf, for example, Iraq is clearly necessary to any mix of states that would ward off Iranian hegemony, and vice versa. Yet Iraq's pariah status, and the reluctance of Gulf states to be guarded by either of these proven "wolves," makes the formation of a viable indigenous balance problematic. The Iraqi example also illuminates the difficulty in measuring power with sufficient precision so as to form a robust balance. After the fall of the shah, Iranian regional hegemony was feared rather than fostered. That led to a U.S. "tilt" towards Iraq during the 1980s in the hope that it would act as a counterweight in its long war with Iran. This balancing strategy backfired, however, when Iraq finally won a decisive victory in 1988, and no regional state, or combination, had the wherewithal to deter an Iraqi drive for hegemony. The cost of this imprecise exercise in balancing was the invasion of Kuwait and a massive American military intervention.

Laissez-faire or "Ecological" Strategy

This strategy recognizes that the powerful forces driving domestic, national, and regional politics can sometimes be withstood only at considerable

cost or not at all. It posits that great political, economic, and social changes are in fact long overdue in much of the world, however destabilizing or undesirable we may judge them to be. Old elites crumble; new classes, ethnic groups, and state challengers emerge; and pent-up frustrations over harsh social and economic conditions or prolonged periods of repression bubble up into radical movements. In principle, U.S. foreign-policy makers may applaud such movement towards reformed political and social orders and hope to channel it in the direction of democratic "enlargement." But these same policymakers also harbor anxieties about the disruption and conflicts that accompany radical social upheaval. Thus, even as the United States promotes fundamental change in, for instance, China, it also supports the conservative regimes in Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Bahrain in their efforts to suppress Islamic political movements.

A laissez-faire approach to coping with regional nationalism, revivalism, and other social activist movements accepts the notion that the costs of outright opposition to change would be prohibitively high, with ultimate success in doubt. This "less-is-more" strategy could thus prove a low-cost option that would not buck the "flow of history" and would allow regions to develop their own security systems. It is quite possible that a regional political order allowed to evolve on its own will produce a "natural" and enduring outcome.

The costs and risks associated with such an "ecological" approach, however, are obvious. The very idea that a region should be allowed to develop on its own implies that it must be kept in a political biosphere free from outside intervention. Therefore, before adopting a hands-off strategy in any regional situation, the United States would also have to persuade other extraregional powers to refrain from intervening or taking advantage of the natural workings of the indigenous states. Given the current U.S. military preeminence and global reach, such persuasion might be possible at modest cost—but not without concomitant risk. First, in the near term, an ecological or laissez-faire approach might lead to chaos, with failing states involved in perpetual warfare and humanitarian tragedies a common occurrence. It would take an extraordinarily strong stomach to view such tragedies with equanimity. The second, longer-run risk is that, left alone, regional politics might throw up hegemons resentful of American influence and inimical to American interests. And since they will have arisen without U.S. sponsorship, there might be little chance of taming them. These risks suggest that a necessary condition for adopting an ecological approach in a region might be that its component states show every sign of being able to develop a healthy, local balance of power when left to themselves.

Regions and Regional Powers

Now that the strategic options are evident, let us examine the regions themselves as defined by a political geography that synthesizes space, power, and apparent psychology. Readers may question the inclusion of one country in a particular region or the exclusion of another, no doubt with good reason. We welcome such challenges; our key point is to encourage thinking that is

regional rather than global and that seeks to identify whether the geopolitical encounter at issue seems to be tending toward some kind of balance or regional hegemony. For analytic purposes, we have left out the Americas and Western Europe because they continue to live in the considerable shadow of American power. We also omit discussion of sub-Saharan Africa because its multitude of states and numerous sub- or micro-regions are too complicated to treat in a single short essay. (Given Africa's potential for chaos amid failing states, and hopeful models of regional cooperation [for example, ECOWAS and the Southern African Development Coordination Conference], it does, however, merit close study.) Lastly, in our discussion of the ten regions that remain we purposely refrain from including considerations of U.S. power so as to get at the regional dynamics as they would unfold in the absence of outside perturbations.

Northeast Asia. This region is currently bipolar in character, marked by the dynamic of a rising China seeking a hegemonic role in the region but contested by an enfeebled, ex-hegemonial, status quo Russia. Chinese aspirations are also offset by four strong secondary states: Japan, the Koreas, and Taiwan, each of which differs sharply in the character of the economic, political, military, diplomatic, or geographical power it enjoys. These states provide important balancing elements vis-à-vis China, but the struggle between the two Koreas also introduces an alternative source of conflict that affects the currently quiescent Sino-Russian dynamic.

Southeast Asia. This region is currently marked by a potentially hegemonic power (China) resisted by three robust secondary states (Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam) and three extraregional actors (India, Japan, and Australia). The main potential for conflict resides in an ongoing Sino-Indian rivalry, although secondary-state competition is vigorous and sometimes fractious.

South Asia. This region is clearly unipolar at present (India), with only one secondary local power capable of effective resistance: Pakistan. China is a first-tier extraregional actor that actively challenges Indian hegemony by shoring up Pakistani capabilities. India's political values are viewed as roughly congruent with the West's. Indeed, a key dynamic is Western uncertainty about the need to maintain Pakistan as an offsetting force to India now that the cold war is over and India is a balancing force against China. South Asian regional politics are thus directly affected by Northeast and Southeast Asian politics. Indeed, Eastern Eurasia, broadly speaking, encompasses a triangular great-power contest among Russia, China, and India, whose hegemonic aspirations overlap in certain regions.

Inner Asia. This region is currently bipolar: Russia attempts to maintain residual dominance in Central Asia and Mongolia, while China tries to maintain its threatened dominance in Tibet and Xinjiang. Both these hegemonic ambitions are under severe challenge by regional peoples aspiring to full national sovereignty. China and Russia may well contest each other for influence among all these emerging states. The dynamic is highly unstable, not only because of the shifting fortunes of the would-be hegemons, but also because of the internal rivalries of the emerging states themselves (for instance, the rivalry between Kazakstan and Uzbekistan, the latter demonstrating a significant "psychological"

power). Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and India are all first-tier extraregional actors likely to be sought as counterweights to the aspiring hegemons.

The Transcaucasus and Caspian Basin. This region displays a dynamic tension between a former unipolar system dominated by Russia and a future multipolar order in which emerging new states seek maximum sovereignty and are assisted by Turkey and Iran as first-tier actors and challengers to Russia. There is no significant external great power in the equation (except the United States, to a limited degree). Russia is still dominant in terms of traditional power measurements, while Iran compensates in the behavioral dimension and Turkey in its ability to exploit ethnic and economic ties. Turko-Iranian rivalries complicate the formation of a simple balance of regional states against Russia. Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Kazakstan, and Turkmenistan fill out a list of second-tier states. With the dynamic so fluid, the possibilities of conflict are considerable.

The Black Sea. Tension again exists here as a declining unipolar system under Russia gives way to a multipolar one including Turkey and Ukraine, but in which Russia remains "first among equals." Bulgaria and Romania are weak second-tier actors. Control of the Black Sea has been a geostrategic goal of each of the first-tier actors for centuries and will continue to be a source of friction. Trade, particularly energy exports, could also sharpen regional competition.

The Persian Gulf. In essence, this is a bipolar system resting on Iran and Iraq, with the two primary powers currently roughly equivalent in strength. Saudi Arabia is the only viable second-tier power. The major tension of the region emerges from a severe skewing of its "natural" geopolitics owing to an extraordinary U.S. involvement that virtually cancels out ordinary regional dynamics. As that involvement wanes, a shift back to "natural" bipolarity could readily produce conflict. Potential extraregional first-tier powers could include Turkey, Israel, Russia, and Western Europe. Serious proliferation problems also exist.

The Levant. This region is clearly multipolar (Egypt, Israel, and Syria), with Israel the leading first-tier state. Jordan and Saudi Arabia are secondary states, and Turkey, Iraq, and Iran the major extraregional powers with greater potential future involvement. Potential for conflict still exists over territorial disputes between Syria and Israel, and there may be some incentive for Syria to develop weapons of mass destruction to offset Israel's capabilities. Sharp bipolarization of the region could emerge under harsh Likud regional policies.

East-Central Europe. Tensions in this region emerge from the shifting dynamic away from Russian hegemony to a multipolar system including West European players, especially Germany. Secondary actors include Ukraine and all the former East European satellites, with additional new influence from Turkey, Greece, Croatia, and Serbia—the latter demonstrating mighty "behavioral" power. The emergence of an independent Ukraine blurs the known geopolitical dynamics of former pre-Soviet East Europe. Conflict potential is augmented by strong drives to new national sovereignty on the part of most states, and the forces of irredentism and ethno-nationalism.

The Maghreb. This region is essentially multipolar among the three contending states of Algeria, Morocco, and Libya—the latter exhibiting mainly "behavioral" power. Egypt is a first-tier extraregional actor whose principal function has been to counter Libyan activism. West European states and the United States are more distant potential players. Conflict may arise among the major regional powers, but true hegemony is out of reach for any of them.

Conclusion

These geopolitical sketches are suggestive only, and each region merits serious study as the power relationships evolve. Nonetheless, some broad, tentative conclusions may still be drawn. Clearly, the regions with shifting dynamics (Northeast Asia, Central Asia, the Caucasus and Caspian, and the Gulf) have the highest potential for conflict. Prospects for attainment of hegemony for any power in these regions are bleak, with the possible exception of South Asia. Russian hegemony in East-Central Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia is fading, but Russia will relinquish that role only grudgingly. China will face the resistance of Russia and three tough second-tier states if it tries to expand its imperial sway westward. Thus, all of these regions display at least a modicum of balance, born of their own dynamics, suggesting the possible wisdom of a U.S. laissez-faire strategy toward them. Indeed, the United States may find itself in the enviable position of being able to promote more security with less involvement.

That may well be the case in the Persian Gulf, where "dual containment" creates an unendingly tense situation, tacitly encouraging an Iran-Iraq entente. Thus, easing extreme pressures on Iran and Iraq (after Saddam Hussein) to allow them to balance each other may prove the wisest policy. Proliferation should nevertheless be steadfastly resisted, since it threatens an "instant" shift in balance-of-power arrangements. Similarly, thought needs to be given to the delicate calculus of power in East-Central Europe. NATO expansion plans, if played too aggressively, could imperil rather than shore up regional security if they spark polarization or become the catalyst for the resurgence of Russian anti-Western postures.

In the end, of course, policymakers would not wish to make U.S. foreign policy a hostage to theoretical abstractions. When crises arise, each case will be judged on its merits. However, Washington will need in each case to examine the characteristics of the regional order, the cost of affecting it, the effectiveness of alternative policies, and the feasibility of accomplishing desired change. In this context, the framework within which many of these crises may arise is of crucial importance. We have outlined a method for analyzing regional security patterns, one that we believe can provide useful insights for decision makers immersed in the countless details of each burgeoning crisis. In quieter moments, the approach we have developed should provide a blueprint for general foreign-policy strategy that prevents "drift" in the absence of immediate threats.

The great benefit of taking a regional approach to foreign policy is that it economizes U.S. resources in a period of retrenchment and fosters flexibility in an era in which nimbleness is the prerequisite for success. While our approach has been strongly geopolitical in character, it also highlights the importance of the political character of the powers in question: is a would-be local hegemon (India, China, or Russia?) likely to participate in a global order based on shared values, or is it "revisionist" in its ambitions? In every case, and especially where the stakes are *not* high, subtlety is a prerequisite for successful diplomacy. The United States must thus be able to court Russian help in East Asia, even as it seeks to curtail Russian influence in East-Central Europe. There are precedents for such a discerning strategy: in the nineteenth century, Britain worked with Russia to keep the peace in the Concert of Europe at the same time that it waged a bitter cold war against Russia in the "Great Game" in Central Asia. Today, and in the years to come, the United States must learn the regional game as it is played all over the globe. For the alternatives to mastering that game are to maintain expensive global U.S. commitments on a long-term basis, or just place our heads in the sand.